



**Tracing the Changing Conceptions of Nous
through the Ages:
A Survey of Vestiges of the Ancient Idea
of the Third or Inner Eye,
Commencing with Ancient Egypt,
and Culminating in John Scotus Eriugena**

Monograph draft (and an open invitation to a genuine discussion of the

changing conceptions of the alleged suprarational human faculty (or faculties), as well as of the implications of these shifts in historical psychologies)

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All Stephanus numbers (such as “527d”) refer to locations in Plato's “*Republic*” (ancient Greek title: *Politeia*, or *on the Just [Man]* (“*Πολιτεία ἡ περὶ δικαίου*”) (Laertius, 2024, 3.60)) unless otherwise noted. The one exception to this is the section on John Scotus Eriugena, where such numbers usually refer to paragraphs in his *Periphyseon*.

Part of my upcoming *Reviving the Platonic Academy* series

No command of ancient Greek is required to grasp the message of this paper.

Front page illustration: Image of the magnificent relief of Horus at the Temple of Edfu (237-57 B.C.) in Egypt. In Greek, Edfu (or Idfu) was known as Ἀπόλλωνος πόλις (Apollonos polis), since Horus, an ancient Egyptian solar deity, often associated with the Winged Disk, was equated with the equally solar Greek deity Apollo.

Horus was frequently symbolized as a seated hawk, or, as in the above relief, as a human figure with the head of a hawk, probably since the hawk, like other birds of prey, can often be seen soaring aloft, high up in the sky, floating serenely on the currents of the air, while using its amazing, truly super-human powers of sight to search the ground far below for potential targets, as snakes. Hence, the hawk would have been an obvious choice for those in search of a potent visual symbol of Heaven, of the Sun (in its various manifestations and aspects), of all that is exalted and noble, of the mental act of contemplation and of the perennial cosmic tension between opposites. In the Indian or Vedic tradition, divine birds like Garuda appear to serve a similar symbolical function, for the exact same reasons.

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Second illustration: Photograph from 2007 of a section of the famous Cong Abbey in county Mayo, Ireland. The present remains, considered a fine example of early Gothic architecture, probably date to the early 1200s, but there was a church on this beautiful site as far back as in the early 600s, according to tradition - a church which it is not inconceivable that John Scotus Eriugena may have visited, since this was probably a locale of some importance even in his time, located right next to the significant salmon fishery associated with the lovely Cong River and the huge, sea-connected Lough Corrib. Copyright: Edmund Schilvold

Abstract:

This paper, which began as a chapter intended to form part of my 2020 master's thesis, and which is now developing into a monograph, constitutes an attempt to conduct a brief yet unorthodox and enlightening survey of the shifting conceptions of what one might call human anthropology – here meant to signify the constitution and the capabilities of the anthropos, the human being, taken as a whole – and, more specifically, of the psychological and suprarational faculty or power which formed such striking a feature of many or most educated accounts of the human being anterior to the Modern Era, and which is often, erroneously in my estimation, correlated with or even completely conflated with the Platonic-Hellenic metaphysical entity of nous (νοῦς) or noos (νόος).

The ambition is to ultimately have this survey extend all the way from the very earliest times for which we have any “data” whatsoever and all the way into Modernity, but since such a project might take numerous years to complete, I have chosen to publish this overview of ideas of the nature of the human being, and of the higher faculties or powers attributed to that being, as I now have it, in the hope that even this very imperfect and in many ways deficient account of ancient and pre-modern psychologies might stimulate some debate when it comes to this now much-neglected topic, and inspire others to undertake similar and complimentary ventures.

Some of the milestones treated of are Ancient Egypt, including the theology centered around the concept of the Amen-Ra (or Amen-Re, or Amun-Ra), and recent scientific discoveries corroborating a certain very important date of which Solon, the celebrated Athenian lawgiver and statesman, was informed by Egyptian priests (according to Plato's *Timaeus*), Pythagoras and his journey to Phoenicia (now part of Israel and Lebanon) and the land of the Nile, the early Christian church father Origen, the possible friendship between that Origen and Plotinus, and Porphyry's descriptions of his own and Plotinus' mystical experiences, the “pocket Platonism” of St. Gregory of Nyssa, quite characteristic of a number of the Fathers of the Church, the conundrum

represented by St. Dionysius, the Areopagite, now better known as Pseudo-Dionysius, since he never was an areopagite (that much is clear), and the stunning implications of his carefully executed infusion of Proclus' Platonic theology into early medieval Christendom, and, finally, the mind-bending survey of the “divisions” of Nature and of Man carried out by John Scotus Eriugena.

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**Unless an awareness of Nous is recovered, its absence
might prove
our undoing**

Why such a survey of the life of Nous in the minds of men?

In the first place, Plato and his contemporaries were hardly the first human beings in history to have conceived of and articulated the concept of ***a power comprehending and transcending Reason*** – nor is it probable that they were the first to have engaged in the conscious or deliberate “cultivation”, for lack of a better word, of the actual, metaphysical *phenomenon* which that ancient concept, I surmise, is a reference to.

In the second place, a significant part of the motivation propelling this project forward has to do with ***the strikingly stark contrast*** between the modern and the ancient state of affairs, and the dawning realization that we have *lost sight of* – in both the literal and metaphorical sense of that expression – something ***vitaly important*** – something we will probably *not*, in the long run, be able to do *without* – and which we

should not *attempt* to do without, even if we, in some sense, *could*.

This profoundly *disturbing* situation – which, to those who see it clearly, and who fathom the continuously growing myriad of wasted resources and lost opportunities resulting from it, is well nigh *unbearable* – is really the only justification for a study of the kind I am now undertaking, for if the Ancient Tradition were still highly regarded and alive – as it appears to have been in St. Augustine’s day – my time would have been better spent elsewhere. But now we are faced with a misfortune which is exceedingly rare, namely this:

“that the gulf between *our present state* and the vision or the glimpses of that which *might have been* is more distressing than *any* of the *worldly* challenges harassing us in the external world.”

On a somewhat personal note, I have before me a text document from 2010, a kind of diary of mine, containing words expressing sentiments of exactly this kind, and fourteen years on, my experience remains fundamentally the same, even though I have learned an immense amount about *the actual workings* of the world since 2010 – I have only, in fact, become more and more and *more* certain that my persistent mental “sensation” is grounded in *an objectively real situation*, which is continually worsening, and which, if left unchecked, is bound to bring about nothing short of a Hell on Earth, to the extent that is possible.

Why that is so may, to some extent, be understood when it is realized that there is an intimate relationship between Beauty and Morality, and between the manifestations of the former and the awakening and preservation of the latter. Moreover, Hell, or rather Debasement, Captivity and Control, is precisely the intention and the aim of the Hidden Hand (as some have styled it) behind the sinister riptides now tearing everything of value apart.

The Distant Dawn of Nous in Human History

If we attempt to trace the concept of Nous, as well as related ideas, ***as far back into the mists of history*** as archaeological and written records will allow for, it seems that we arrive in a rather surprising location – that of Ancient Egypt. There are reasons to suspect that a slightly different research trajectory – one focusing on a different mental power or phenomenon – would have landed us in Ancient India, but in this overview I will be focusing on Egypt, as the connection between Greece and Egypt is the one that is, by far, the most obvious and the easiest to establish if we consult ***the ancient Hellenes themselves*** – as I strongly believe we ***should***.

Plato Acknowledges Ancient Egypt as an Eminent Seat of Wisdom

One of the most striking ancient statements of ***the affinity between Egypt and Hellas*** is actually made by ***none other*** than ***Plato himself***, near the beginning of the *Timaeus*. There, the dialogue retells a story brought to Greece from Egypt, by the legendary Athenian lawgiver ***Solon*** (630–560 B.C.). According to the dialogue, Solon once visited the Egyptian city of ***Saïs***, where he, upon his arrival, learned that the inhabitants viewed themselves as somehow ***related*** to the people of Athens, and believed both Saïs and Athens to have been founded by the divinity known to the Hellenes as Athena (and whom the people of Saïs called Neith).

When Solon then proceeded to interview some of the Egyptian priests concerning antiquity of the world, “he discovered that just about every Greek, including himself, was all but completely ignorant about such matters” (Plato, 2000, 22a).

One of the priests, “a very old man”, even exclaimed, “‘Ah, Solon, Solon, you Greeks are ever children. There isn’t an old man among you.’”

To this, Solon understandably said, “‘What? What do you mean?’” “‘You are young,’ the old priest replied, ‘young in soul, every one of you. Your souls are devoid of beliefs about antiquity handed down by ancient tradition. Your souls lack any learning made hoary by time.’” (Plato, 2000, 22a–22c)

What might such learning be? The dialogue goes on to relate certain snippets of it, of the kind pertaining to anthropology and world history, such as the claim that there have been ***many great floods and other disasters*** affecting mankind, and ***not only one*** – a view which, in recent years, has actually been *partially* corroborated by the momentous

geological discoveries believed to indicate the so-called ***Younger Dryas Impact Event*** –c.f. Firestone, et al., 2007, Kinzie, et al., 2014, Wolbach, et al., 2018. According to this hypothesis, a number of cataclysmic events may have taken place on our Earth between c. 12,900 and 11,600 years ago – and the latter date is, incredibly, the one given to us by the ancient Egyptian priests, by way of Solon and Plato, for the destruction of Atlantis.

Laws, government and wisdom are also mentioned in this most intriguing section of the *Timaeus*, but little concrete is said of Egyptian philosophical and religious systems, unfortunately.

Evidence of the Concepts of Nous and Noesis in Ancient Egypt

Did the ancient Egyptians have a concept similar to the Greek ***Nous***? Are there any signs that they were aware of a power surpassing and transcending that of Discursive Reason (*Dianoia*)? There are indications that the answer should be in the affirmative. One example of such signs is the ancient Egyptian custom of marking that which is traditionally viewed the world over – including in ***India*** – as ***the position of the invisible Third Eye***, namely the middle of the forehead, with the head of a rising serpent, a cobra – the so-called ***Uraeus*** (from Greek ***οὐραῖος; ouraios***) or *Wadjet*. This symbol is an ***unmistakable*** part of numerous ancient Egyptian artworks depicting the pharaohs, such as the exquisitely wrought golden death mask of Tutankhamen (Tutankhamun) – who lived c. 1342–c. 1325 B.C.

Another example is the Egyptian worship of the Deity ***Amen-Ra*** (also known as Amun-Ra, or Amen-Re, or Ammon-Ra), centered on the city of “Annu of the north”, better known to us today as ***Heliopolis*** or ***On, the City of the Sun*** (Budge, 2012, k.l. 6523). The reason why I say that is that Amen-Ra is Egyptian for ***the Hidden Sun***, and that the most

striking metaphor in Plato's *Politeia*, ***the Idea of the Good***, could perfectly well be called ***exactly*** that – ***the Hidden Sun***. Furthermore, the Idea of the Good, the Sun of the Spiritual or Intelligible (Noetic) Realm, the Platonic Realm of Being, can only be experienced by those who have purified and rekindled the Eye of the Soul (527d-527e), which is closely related to Nous.

To some, the notion of a connection between the two may seem more than a little far-fetched, but I disagree. The fact is that there are a number of similarities between the Divinity of Amen-Ra and the Sun of the Intelligible (or rather Noetic) Realm revealed by Plato. The latter will be examined in greater detail later on. As for Amen-Ra, the worship of some form of ***Ra*** at Heliopolis goes back to ***at least circa 3.350 B.C.*** (Budge, 2012, k.l. 6523) This deity, who was often symbolically represented as having the head of a hawk, and as carrying a rod or scepter in one hand and the emblem of Life, the Ankh, in the other, gradually gained a more and more prominent role in the Egyptian religion, so that, by the time of the magnificent New Kingdom (founded by pharaoh Ahmose I or Amasis I), ***the conception*** of Amen-Ra had morphed into something akin to a supreme god, the Egyptian “Lord of Hosts”, so to speak.

In one hymn, Amen-Ra is called “the divine man-child, the heir of eternity, ***self-begotten and self-born***, king of earth, prince of the Tuat [the realm of the Afterlife, also called the Duat] (...) thou king of Right and Truth, thou lord of eternity, thou prince of everlastingness, ***thou sovereign of all the gods, thou god of life, thou creator of eternity*** (...). (Budge, 2012, k.l. 6711, emphasis added)

That quote is remarkable by itself, but it constitutes only a tiny part of the material that has been discovered. In a later series of praises inscribed on the walls of royal tombs at Thebes (Budge, 2012, k.l. 6729), the supplicant exclaims, “Praise be to thee, O Rā, exalted Sekhem

[Power]; thou art the Soul exalted **in the double hidden place**, thou art indeed Khenti-Amenti [a epithet referring to Osiris]" (k.l. 6795) and "Praise be to thee, O Rā, exalted Sekhem [Power]; **thou givest forth light in the hidden place**, and thou art the bodies of the god of generation." (Budge, 2012, k.l. 6802, emphasis added)

But ***the most extraordinary ones*** are, possibly, these:

"Praise be to thee, O Rā, exalted Sekhem [Power]; thou art the maker of the Circles, thou makest bodies to come into being by thine own creative vigour. **Thou, O Rā, hast created the things which exist, and the things which do not exist, the dead, and the gods, and the spirits**; thou art indeed the body that maketh Khati [a lesser deity] to come into being." (k.l. 6846, emphasis added)

"Praise be to thee, O Rā, exalted Sekhem; **thou art the doubly hidden and secret god, and the souls go where thou leadest them, and those who follow thee thou makest to enter in**; thou art indeed the bodies of Ameni [a lesser deity]." (k.l. 6846, emphasis added)

Pythagoras, arguably the Father of Platonism, spent more than 20 years in Egypt

In spite of all this, it is probably only when we examine the work styled *On the Pythagoric Life* that the kinship between Platonism and the ancient religion of Egypt becomes ***well nigh impossible*** to dismiss – provided that we accept the authenticity of the information presented in that work, of course. In this treatise, the Greek title of which is *Περὶ τοῦ Πυθαγορικοῦ βίου*, the prominent late Platonist Iamblicus (245–325 A.D.)

relates to us that the young Pythagoras, while visiting the Phoenician city-states of Sidon and Tyre, resolved to journey on to Egypt:

“Having been previously instructed therefore in **the mysteries of the Phœnicians [the Phœnicians, a Semitic people closely related to and, in the eyes of some Hellenes, such as Herodotus, *encompassing* the entity now styled the “Israelites”]**, which were derived like a colony and a progeny from the sacred rites in Egypt, and hoping from this circumstance that he should be a partaker of more beautiful, divine, and genuine monuments of erudition in Egypt; joyfully calling to mind also the admonitions of his preceptor Thales, he immediately embarked for Egypt, through the means of some Egyptian sailors, who very opportunely at that time landed on the Phœnician coast under mount Carmelus [Mount Carmel, today in Israel], in whose temple Pythagoras, separated from all society, for the most part dwelt.” (Iamblicus, 2016, k.l. 279, emphasis added)

According to Iamblicus, it was only after **22 years in Egypt**, during which Pythagoras was “initiated into all the mysteries of the Gods”, as well as some additional years among the Magi of Babylon, to which he was brought as a captive by the Persians, that Pythagoras at last returned to his native Samos. He was then circa 56 years old, and had earned the nickname “the long-haired Samian”, which is interesting, since it inevitably reminds one of certain other famous “long-haired” men of history (such as Jesus Christ – if He actually existed – and Apollonius of Tyana).

That an earnest Seeker of Knowledge like the young Hellene Pythagoras was willing and able to spend more than two decades in Egypt, indicates that the complexity and profundity of the Egyptian religion, at least as interpreted and practiced by the priests and initiates, far exceeded the picture hitherto painted of that religion by the textual and archeological

discoveries made since the days of Napoleon – even though that picture is remarkable and intriguing by itself.

When we combine this information on the role played by Egyptian priests in Pythagoras' gaining of Wisdom or Knowledge with the reference to Pythagoreans in Plato's *Politeia*, where Socrates states that **he agrees with them** (530d), and then add the many similarities between the Pythagorean doctrine and "the Art of the Turning around of the Soul" (518d ff.) in Plato, then I think we can agree that my supposition concerning the origin of Platonism has been adequately corroborated.

Porphyry, Origen and Plotinus, and the Question of Origen's Identity

I will not now go further into what Plato says of Nous, nor will I elaborate on St. Augustine's views on the subject, since I have done so elsewhere in my thesis (please see the approved master's thesis of May 2020, as well as the new version published in 2024) – instead, I will move on to certain Platonists not yet mentioned, such as Porphyry of Tyre (233–305 A.D. and Plotinus (204–270 A.D.). (Porphyry's original name was, interestingly, Malchos or Melech (מלך), a Phoenician/Semitic name meaning "King". (Porphyry, 1917, k.l. 285))

Many still call them "Neoplatonists", but I prefer not to use that term, since it appears to have a somewhat derogatory flavor to it (c.f. Catana, 2013), and since none of the philosophers so described ever called themselves "Neoplatonists", but evidently saw themselves as exponents of an authentically Platonic (or Hellenic-Mystic) tradition, going all the way back to Plato himself, and, beyond Plato, to other leading Grecian lights, such as Hesiod, Homer and the now much-neglected *Orpheus*. (I strongly suspect that Orpheus is being deliberately avoided at some level of modern academic decision-making because the gaining of even a basic

understanding of the Orphic method of performing theology would immediately cause the modern student to realize that the ancient Greek and Roman mythologies were never intended to be taken literally, or at “face value” – not, at any rate, by their originators and earliest promulgators – and this would then instantly explode the convenient and useful myth of “pagan absurdities” and ridiculous “idol-worship”, at least when it comes to the ancient Greco-Roman world.)

In his foreword to the *Enneads*, the collection of Plotinus’ writings edited by Porphyry, the latter provides us with ***some fascinating observations*** concerning the Platonic philosophical milieu in the Rome of their time. At its center was the remarkable human being that was ***Plotinus***. At the age of 27, he had been seized by a passion for philosophy. This had brought him to the city of Alexandria in Egypt, then the intellectual capital of the Mediterranean world, and there he had at last met the teacher he had yearned for – ***Ammonius*** (175–242 A.D.). ***With him Plotinus had then remained continually for eleven years***, making “such progress in philosophy that he became eager to investigate ***the Persian methods and the system adopted among the Indians***”. (Porphyry, 1917, k.l. 107–109, emphasis added)

At the age of forty, Plotinus had settled down in Rome, where he associated with Erennius and ***Origen*** (Porphyry, 1917, k.l. 115). It is somewhat uncertain whether ***this Origen*** is the Origen we know as the famous and controversial Christian church father (see the Stanford Encyclopedia entry on Origen; Corrigan and Harrington, 2015), but it does, in my view, seem highly likely. The latter Origen (184–253 A.D.) did, after all, grow up in Alexandria, and was, like Plotinus, a pupil of Ammonius (Eusebius, 1990, p. 196), and his intellectual affinity with Platonism is clearly evidenced by the scant remains of his writings.

In any event, the aged Plotinus is described as almost universally loved and admired by the citizens of Rome:

“Not a few men and women of position, on the approach of death, had left their boys and girls, with all their property, in his care, feeling that with Plotinus for guardian the children would be in holy hands.” (k.l. 208)

Of Origen, the following remarkable anecdote – which **does** remind one of the Christian Origen spoken of by Eusebius of Caesarea (263–339 A.D.) – is related:

“One day Origen came to the conference-room; Plotinus blushed deeply and was on the point of bringing his lecture to an end; when Origen begged him to continue, he said: ‘The zest dies down when the speaker feels that his hearers have nothing to learn from him.’” (k.l. 264)

If we now compare the vivid description of that meeting with what Eusebius writes concerning the Christian Origen’s capabilities in Greek philosophy, I think we will have to conclude that the hypothesis that the Origen who was a close friend of Plotinus was someone else than Origen the church father is, to say the least, improbable.

“Many other educated people were so impressed by Origen’s universal renown that they came to his school to benefit by his skill in biblical exegesis; while innumerable heretics and a considerable number of the most eminent philosophers listened to him with close attention, as he instructed them not only in theology but to some extent in secular philosophy too, for he introduced any pupils in whom he detected natural ability to philosophic studies as well. First he taught them geometry, arithmetic, and the other preparatory subjects; then he led them on to the systems of the philosophers, discussing their published theories and examining and criticizing those of the different schools, with the result that

the Greeks themselves acknowledged his greatness as a philosopher. (Eusebius, 1990, pp. 194–195, emphasis added)

Porphyry also gives us an extended quotation from a work by the literary critic Longinus (c. 213–273 A.D.), entitled *On the End*, where Longinus says the following of Plotinus:

“Plotinus, it would seem, set the principles of Pythagoras and of Plato in a clearer light than anyone before him; on the same subjects, Numenius, Cronius, Moderatus, and Thrasyllus fall far short of him in precision and fullness.” (1917, k.l. 362, emphasis added)

Here it is appropriate to pause for a moment, and to compare this statement by Longinus to the impudent assertion frequently made by some modern scholars, namely that the “Neo-Platonism” of Plotinus is *not* a continuation of the “authentic” Platonism of Plato. But to continue with our main discussion: ***If*** the Origen described by Porphyry (who was no friend of the established churches) be identical to the ***Christian*** Origen honored by Eusebius, the Church Historian, then ***what*** does that ***imply***?

To me, it certainly seems to entail the following, namely that in the 200s A.D., Christianity and Platonism, or at least certain ***prominent factions*** within these religious movements, ***still*** had so much in common that an avowed Platonist like Plotinus could view Origen as an accomplished philosopher, and, even ***more*** strikingly, perhaps, that a devout Christian like Origen (for I think no one would deny that he was a Christian) could view Plotinus as a believer in the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.

That appears to me to be the best, most plausible explanation for the episode in the conference-room described by Porphyry, and for the more general statement made by Eusebius, as well as for the friendship

between those two sages – ***provided***, of course, that Eusebius’ and Porphyry’s Origen are one and the same person – and I suspect ***that almost unavoidable inference***, or rather ***the avoidance of it***, to be the reason why some have recently been postulating the existence of a “pagan Origen”, different from the controversial church father, for, as someone who has spent more than five years studying Christian theology, with a view to becoming a priest, I can ***decidedly say*** that there is now, and has been for a good while, a pervasive and worrying effort in the shady groves of Modern Academia, often rather cleverly concealed, and fully visible only to those who have attained to a certain level of knowledge, to not only ***distance or divorce*** Christianity from its Platonic and Hellenic heritage, but ***to misrepresent and distort*** its core teachings (such as the Kingdom of Heaven, the relationship between the Body and the Soul and concepts like Prophecy and Righteousness) and its history in such a way that a future, hoped-for merger between Christianity and Materialism, and, more specifically, the Materialism and accompanying Utopianism of Marxism, is facilitated.

Should such machinations be successful, then institutional Christianity will cease to be what we have historically called by that name, and any “pagan” religion with a firm belief in a Transcendent Deity, an Immortal Soul and an Afterlife of Rewards and Punishments will have to be seen as more ***truly and actually Christian*** than such mutilated and inverted “Christianity”.

The Mystical Experiences of Plotinus and Porphyry, and “the God over all”

The part of Porphyry’s foreword to the *Enneads* which has the greatest relevance for our discussion of Nous is probably, however, the last one, where he states that Plotinus achieved “the one end”, the supreme goal, of his life, namely “to approach to the God over all”, ***four times*** during

the period Porphyry was with him, which were the final seven years of Plotinus' life.

To this testimony, Porphyry adds that "To this God, I also declare, I Porphyry, that in my sixty-eighth year I too was once admitted and I entered into Union." (1917, k.l. 415)

Precisely what this "approaching to" or union with "the God over all" consisted in, is difficult to ascertain, but I think we may safely surmise that it had the character of "***the quintessential mystical experience***" – a mental experience of Divine Light, surpassing all sensory experience – and that Plato would have said that it was the encounter of the Soul with the "inestimable beauty" (509a) of the Idea or Countenance of the Good. It is also possible, however, that they went even further, and encountered the Father, by way of what was later styled an Unknowing – the Father of whom Socrates, when questioned in the Republic, refuses to speak.

Incidentally, one has to wonder if Porphyry named himself exactly that in reference to that momentous mental experience, or in anticipation of it, for Porphyry is, of course, a reference to the color purple, and it is precisely the color purple that Plato, in his *Politeia*, in a parable dealing with a procedure highly reminiscent of the ritual of Baptism (429d-429e), effectively states to be symbolic of the awakening of the Eye of the Soul, and of the gaining of Psychological Kingship, i.e. of a mental state in which one is not under the Tyranny of one's Necessary or one's Harmful Desires, nor in a Democratic State in which all the unequal parts of oneself are given "equal rights", so to speak, nor under a Timocratic or Spartan constitution favoring the martial or honor-loving part, but one in which the Supreme Mental Faculty, the Inner or Third Eye, being in continual Communion with the Supreme Deity, is enthroned at its proper place in the psychological hierarchy, meaning at the Apex or Acropolis of

the Soul, from which position it informs and guides the conduct of all the lower faculties or parts.

Once it is taken into consideration that Plato's purple is a Tyrian or Phoenician purple, of the kind produced in Tyre, and that Porphyry was a native of Tyre, the web of connections appears even stranger, but I will not go further into that here.

A modern practitioner of Platonism, the American Eric Fallick, whom I only discovered in November 2022, has recently published a very interesting little commentary on the subject of the nature and frequency of Plotinus' encounters with the Supreme Deity. As Mr. Fallick points out, Porphyry's statement concerning the number of times his Master had entered into Union need not be and should not be interpreted to mean that Plotinus "only" achieved that "one end" four times over the course of his entire life – all it really tells us is that Porphyry *was aware of* four occasions during which Plotinus had attained to that highest "altered state of consciousness" over the seven-year period Porphyry had been a disciple of his.

According to Mr. Fallick's literal translation of the original Greek, this is what the sentence in question actually says:

“But he [Plotinus] attained four times, I suppose, when I was with him, this goal [of Union] in unspeakable actuality and not in [mere] potentiality.”

Another reason why Plotinus mystical experiences were probably a frequent occurrence is that he tells us so himself in the *Enneads*. Mr. Fallick has studied several English translations of them, and, finding them all wanting in various ways, has produced the following one himself:

“Often (many times) waking to myself from the body and becoming outside of the other things, but inside of myself, seeing a beauty marvelous, how great, and trusting then especially (myself) to be of the better part, and effecting the best life and having become the same thing with the Divine and being seated in it, coming to that actuality beyond all the other noetical, seating myself (therein), after this state in the Divine, **coming down to discursive reasoning from Nous**, I am at a loss how I ever even came down now, and how ever for me the soul has become within the body being this, of such a sort as it has appeared in itself, even though being in a body.” (Emphasis added)

Mr. Fallick adds that

“I have rendered it as it is in the Greek, as one long sentence with lots of participles and clauses, and pretty literally, but hopefully it is clear enough. I don't think the differences in the translations reflect difficulty in interpreting and rendering the Greek, but rather just the lack of skill of the translators and the usual refusal to literally and faithfully render what the original actually says.”

St. Gregory of Nyssa and his obvious allusions to Plato's Cave

The next figure in the early Christian era I will treat of in this overview is St. Gregory of Nyssa (335–394 A.D.) His short dialogue *On the Soul and the Resurrection* is, perhaps, the most readable **patristic** introduction to Christian Platonism. There, the indebtedness of early Christianity to Plato and the Platonic tradition is simply unmistakable to anyone familiar with the content of dialogues like the *Politeia*. Consider, for example, the following statement criticizing what we moderns would call **the empiricism and materialism** of Epicurus (341–270 B.C.):

“To him [Epicurus] the visible was the limit of existence; he made our senses the only means of our apprehension of things; he completely closed the eyes of his soul, and was incapable of seeing anything in the intelligible and immaterial world, just as a man, who is imprisoned in a cabin whose walls and roof obstruct the view outside, remains without a glimpse of all the wonders of the sky. Verily, everything in the universe that is seen to be an object of sense is as an earthen wall, forming in itself a barrier between the narrower souls and that intelligible world which is ready for their contemplation; (...).” (Gregory of Nyssa, 1892, p. 431)

In terms of worldview and epistemology, this passage is like a simplified and condensed version of Plato’s famous Allegory of the Cave in the *Politeia* (c.f. 515a-d). Even the basic terminology, such as “the eyes of his soul” and “the intelligible (...) world” is **virtually identical** to Plato’s, who uses terms like “the eye of the soul” (ἡ αὐγὴ τῆς ψυχῆς) (533c, 540a) and “the intelligible place” (“ὁ νοητός τοπος”) (517b).

A few pages later, we find another very revealing passage:

“The speculative [noetic?] and critical [dianoetic; reasoning?] faculty is the property of the soul’s godlike part; for it is by these that we grasp the Deity also. If, then, whether by forethought here, or by purgation hereafter, our soul becomes free from any emotional connection with the brute creation, there will be nothing to impede its contemplation of the Beautiful; for this last is essentially capable of attracting, in a certain way, every being that looks toward it. If, then, the soul is purified of every vice, it will most certainly be in the sphere of Beauty. The Deity is, in very substance, Beautiful; and to the Deity the soul will in its state of

purity have affinity, and the soul will embrace it as like itself.”
(Gregory of Nyssa, 1892, p. 448)

With the possible exception of “purgation hereafter”, we here have a view of psychology, theology and the afterlife which agrees **almost perfectly** with the view set forth in Plato’s dialogues. There is a reference to what the translator calls “the speculative faculty” (clearly speculation in the sense of contemplation; from Latin specula, watchtower, and specere, to behold), and the view of the soul as being hampered by its attachment to the physical body, and of the Divine as truly Beautiful, and of contemplation as communion with Divine Beauty are all concepts which are easily discovered in the *Politeia*.

For good measure, as one might say, St. Gregory of Nyssa also uses the term **Good** as a synonym for God both above and below the section where this quote is taken from – **a fundamentally Platonic divine appellation**. Even that is not all, however, for he makes several references to **Divine Wisdom**, and the female in the dialogue, **Macrina**, comes across as a character approaching a personification of such Wisdom, i.e. **Sophia**, a concept which is probably Hellenic in origin.

The above does, in a way, reflect very positively on this Cappadocian Father of the Church, as it demonstrates that he was **not** the sort of narrow-minded fanatic who was willing to discard any and all things labeled “pagan” as worthless. Still, it **is** a little curious to observe that he does not, as far as I am able to see, explicitly give credit to Plato – or any other Platonist – when availing himself of patently Platonic categories and ideas. He is clearly aware of Plato and his dialogues, though, for he once mentions “the Platonic chariot” – one of the foremost metaphors of the *Phaedrus*.

In this approach, St. Gregory of Nyssa resembles St. Augustine of Hippo, who, as we shall later see, embarks on the greatest attempt ever made to

reconcile Christianity with Platonism, while only *once*, as far as I am aware of, honoring Socrates and Plato as the actual progenitors of almost the entire metaphysical or otherworldly portion of his magnificent edifice – and then only in a rather roundabout and obscure way (D.Tr. IV.18.24), in passages which most readers with no prior familiarity with Plato's *Politeia* have probably not understood the significance of.

The Enigma of St. Dionysius, the Pseudo-Areopagite: Is the unknown Christian saint actually a female Platonist?

Now that we have taken a look at one of the foremost earlier Fathers of the Christian Church – or perhaps we ought to say *churches* – it seems sensible to carry on to another living milestone in the history of human conceptions of the Divine, and of the human view of the abilities of the human psyche to apprehend and interact with the contents of that exalted category, namely the mysterious author who in our era is usually styled *Pseudo-Dionysius*. This “false” Dionysius is undoubtedly one of the strangest and most enigmatic personages in the entire history of Christianity and Platonism, and is identical to the individual who used to be known to Christians as St. Dionysius the Areopagite, or simply as “*the Areopagite*”, and his works seem to me to form another necessary resting place on this intellectual journey of ours, since they, as we shall soon see, could be said to both represent and embody *a watershed epoch* in history, namely the period when the ancient and still brightly flaming torch of Classical Civilization and Hellenic Philosophy was at last almost wholly extinguished, and the embers of that venerable fire were left in the custody of Christianity and the evolving churches, where they would, for a thousand years to come, when exposed to the searching winds of objectively *great minds* and of *genuine seekers after Truth and Knowledge*, ignite a semblance, and sometimes more than a mere semblance, of the fiery and impassioned epiphanies of former days.

Who was this “Pseudo-Dionysius”? We know now that although the writings in question, the *Corpus Areopagiticum*, do contain claims to the effect that they were composed by the Dionysius who allegedly became a disciple of St. Paul (c.f. Acts 17:22–34), and have, in several ways, been shaped so as to give the reader the impression that they stem from the first century A.D., **critical inquiries have revealed that they must, in all likelihood, have been penned more than four centuries posterior to the rise of Christianity, by someone familiar with Proclus (412–485 A.D.), the head of the Platonic Academy in Athens, if not by Proclus himself**, since they frequently employ language exceedingly similar to, and in some cases even *identical* to, that which was invented by Proclus in the second half of the 400s, and also since there is no reference to the *Corpus* in any extant literary work prior to the early 500s A.D.

Although this thesis will probably, even now, shock many a Christian not familiar with the modern academic discussion pertaining to the authorship of the “Dionysian” writings, it is actually *very* far from being new. The first scholar to articulate it extensively in English in the modern era was probably Ronald Hathaway, who in 1969 published his seminal study *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius*. I would much rather refer the interested reader to the lectures on the subject delivered by Dr. Pierre Grimes in the 1990s, however, as I frankly find Hathaway’s treatise to be somewhat tainted by his rather obvious hostility to the anonymous Platonist whom he has reluctantly realized is the real author – a hostility which, I infer, arises out of the “purity fantasy” (for lack of a better term) which has become so wide-spread in certain Protestant Christian circles of late, and which could be summarized as a desire to purge Christianity of all influences construed as “pagan”, and to have it conform as closely as possible to a postulated “pure” ancient “Christian Judaism”, which, in my view, *never actually existed*.

The recent literary output by the Anglican bishop Tom Wright, better known under the amazingly presumptuous pseudonym “N. T. Wright”, constitutes a prime example of this highly questionable “purification” effort, which actually *inverts* the tendency of Christian scholarship when compared to the one that prevailed a hundred years ago.

Dr. Grimes, on the other hand, is much more sympathetic to Platonism, even when it is the *late* Platonism of Proclus and associates, and also provides a more accurate historical overview, I think, even though some of his criticism of Christianity and the Church would have benefited from being more nuanced and balanced.

Now, according to Dr. Grimes, it was actually Lorenzo Valla (c. 1406–1457), the Italian scholar who exposed the so-called *Donation of Constantine* as a deliberate forgery, and whose research contributed to provoking the fateful Protestant Revolution (c.f. also Corrigan and Harrington, 2015), who first concluded, since the time of the debates of the 500s A.D., that the *Corpus Areopagiticum* could not possibly be as ancient as traditionally assumed. However, it seems that it was only in the twentieth century that it was at last widely accepted that the real “Dionysius” was not only some five hundred years closer to us in time than St. Paul’s reported Athenian convert, but that that he must have been a “Neo-Platonist”, or, at the very least, a Christian wonderfully well versed in the works of Proclus, and particularly in Proclus’ final masterpiece, *the Theology of Plato*. (One would think that Thomas Taylor, the extraordinary autodidact who translated Proclus into English, would have suspected a connection, but if he did, he never committed such thoughts to writing, it seems.)

Drawing on the conclusions arrived at by Ronald Hathaway, and adding some well-founded conjectures of his own, Dr. Grimes boldly suggested to his audience that the “Dionysian” letters and treatises constitute

something far more interesting than a mere pseudonymous array of texts – which is a fairly common occurrence in ancient literature – namely a carefully executed effort on the part of the Academy to infuse early Medieval Christian theology and culture with the basic tenets of the mature Platonic Tradition, so as to enable the survival of at least fragments of and pointers to Platonic Wisdom in an environment which was becoming increasingly hostile to anything construed as “pagan” or “polytheistic” (a philosophical theology which announces a single *Supreme Deity*, more elevated and transcendent in nature than that of any other *openly discussed* theological schema, and which effectively gives all other classes of Gods and Beings the roles of messengers and interpreters, can hardly be said to be “polytheistic” – not in the conventional and rather derogatory and disparaging sense of that term – but the poisonous accusation of “polytheism”, which is, in actuality, little more than a hypocritical straw man argument invented by certain misguided proponents of the Abrahamic religions to defame their opposition – is a matter we will deal with later on).

Considering *the implications* of the uncovering of the real nature of the Corpus, including its indebtedness to none other than Proclus – ***implications rendered truly astounding by the fact that Christians relied on the Corpus as highly authoritative and divinely inspired for some one thousand years***, and in some cases for even longer – Dr. Grimes proceeded to propose a way forward which I have come to *wholeheartedly* agree with, namely that Christians, *rather than* embarking on a quest for an “unadulterated” ancient faith which never actually existed, and dispensing with many of the beliefs they have come to hold dear, should *acknowledge* that they are, to a very great and hitherto wholly unacknowledged degree, *Platonists*, embrace their Platonic heritage as their own, and see if the Corpus, being *the final and ironic farewell* of the Athenian Academy, so to speak, might contain clues which could somehow aid us in ushering in a True Platonic Revival.

In more recent years, the suspicion indicated by Hathaway and set forth in plain English by Dr. Grimes has been articulated in an even more pointed and arresting form by Tuomo Lankila, a Finnish academic. He proposes *Theodora*, the mysterious female to whom Damascius (Δαμάσκιος), the last dean of the Academy, dedicated his *Philosophical History*, as the author. Since Damascius' history has long since suffered the curious fate that *so very, very frequently* seems to befall the more interesting historical surveys made by the ancients, namely that of total oblivion (think of Berosus/Berossus and Manetho, for instance), this Theodora is only known to us today through what Photius/Photios (c. 810-893), Patriarch of Constantinople, decided to say of her in his summary of Damascius' work – one of many such summaries in Photius' *Bibliotheca*:

“Read Damascius the Damascene's ‘On the Life of Isidore the Philosopher’ [identical to *Philosophical History*]. The book is long, comprising some sixty chapters. Having decided to write the Life of Isidore, he dedicated the composition to **a certain Theodora, Hellene too by religious persuasion** (Ἑλληνα μὲν καὶ αὐτῇ θρησκείαν τιμώσῃ), not unacquainted with the disciplines of philosophy, poetics and grammar, but also well versed in geometry and higher arithmetic, Damascius himself and Isidore having taught her and her younger sisters at different times.

She was the daughter of Kyrina and Diogenes, the son of Eusebius son of Flavian, a descendant of Sampsigeramus and Monimos, who were Iamblichus' ancestors too, all of them first prize winners in idolatrous impiety. Damascius dedicates Isidore's biography to her; it was her exhortation, together with that of certain others who joined in her request, that was responsible for the author's efforts, as he himself testifies.” (Lankila, 2011, p. 2, emphasis added)

This statement by Photius, translated by into English by Prof. Polymnia Athanassiadi, is not only noteworthy because it mentions Theodora, a female Platonist who would otherwise have been unknown to us, but because the patriarch seems to admit that Platonic philosophy was really Hellenic religion, and vice versa, while nevertheless deriding this persuasion as “idolatry”.

When I first heard the expression “first prize winners in idolatrous impiety”, I thought I was being treated to a hearty joke, but I suppose Photius probably did mean it seriously. If he did, then he committed a grave injustice, I am afraid, as accusations of “idol worship” and such like, when applied to the more educated and insightful non-Christians of old, are clearly based on little more than misrepresentations of their actual beliefs – as I already indicated above when mentioning the topics of Orpheus and of “polytheism”.

To put it briefly: Instead of freely acknowledging (1) that the images and statues of “pagan” gods were *symbols*, and *aids* to meditation and worship, (2) that the so-called mythologies were not meant to be taken literally, but represented ancient scientific, metaphysical, cosmological and psychological insights, encoded into symbolic language, making use of *the literary device of personification*, (3) that the vast majority of “pagan” gods were only lesser deities, or daemons or heroes, vastly inferior to the acknowledged but rarely mentioned First Principle, and thus occupied positions almost identical to those possessed by “angels” (a word meaning *messenger*) in “Israelism” (“Proto-Judaism”) and Christianity, and (4) that the most sophisticated and eloquent indictment of *actual* idolatry ever developed came from none other than Plato (!), when he denounced representations of representations, or any remove from Truth and Higher Being further than absolutely necessary – instead of acknowledging *any* of that, I say, and engaging in actual debates with people of other religions, many Israelite scribes and priests, and, in some cases, prophets, consistently made use of what we now call *straw man*

arguments in their attacks on the “Nations” (אֲדָמָה) – arguments which they must have known or ought to have known were often misconstruals – and *this artificially and artfully created dichotomy* between Israel and “the Others” was, to some extent, inherited by Christianity, in which the nationalistic and ethnic motivations underlying such polemics came into conflict with a number of the utterances attributed to Christ, and were abandoned, and the dichotomy itself, *originating in the ethnocentrism and exclusivism of the Israelites*, was transformed into the supposed perennial conflict between Christianity and the alleged “Pagans” or “Heathens”.

Prof. William Reginald Halliday (1886–1966) made the following simple, but memorable observation regarding the slanderous attacks made by many Christians on their non-Christian opponents, due to the spirit of religious intolerance arguably inherited by orthodox Christianity from “Israelism”:

“If the pagans were unfair, except in a technical sense, in branding the Christians as atheists, the Christian attack upon pagans for the unintelligent worship of stocks and stones is almost equally wide of the mark.

The charge was indeed an old one, and the arguments by which it is driven home are borrowed by the Fathers from the commonplaces of the Stoic handbooks. It is a repetition of arguments which pagan thinkers had themselves brought forward in an earlier age.” (Halliday, 1925, pp. 6–7)

The importance of this pattern, and its implications for Christian theology, and for the interpretation of the Old Testament (the Tanakh), cannot be overstated, and must be openly and honestly dealt with if Christianity is to recover a firm footing in the future. The patterns and the paradigms of *caricaturing* and *inversion* and *artfully fashioned pairs*

of opposites, made blatantly obvious (and impossible to ignore for anyone valuing honesty) by two centuries of stunning literary, archaeological revelations – a paradigm of which the enormous difference between the demonized “Egypt” of the Book of Exodus and the real Ancient Egypt revealed by archaeology speaks volumes – cannot be allowed to stand, even if its demolition entails a drastic revision of Christianity, for if we do, we endorse the continued violation of *justice* – the justice due, in many cases, to our own distant progenitors and ancestors.

But to return to the question of the authorship of the Corpus: Lankila goes on to set forth a novel, but convincing *hypothesis* concerning its genesis and generation:

“Aware of the abilities of his assistant [Theodora], he [Damascius] convinced her of the importance of carrying out a very special task. Taking the example of divine Iamblichus in his manifesto for the defence of theurgy (a work known today by the title *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum*), two centuries before, she had to operate under a pseudonym, not this time adopting the identity of a venerable Egyptian prophet as Iamblichus had done, but of one of the ancient leaders of the adversaries. And so she did and produced, in an impressively short time, a collection of four books and ten letters. These writings alluded to other more sacred ones. By accomplishing these feats, she built a fortification around the hidden doctrine in order that the happier future generations need not reinvent [or rather *rediscover*] all the truth concerning the classes of gods but could enjoy the Platonic vision of the great Proclus.” (Lankila, 2011, p. 3)

Whether Lankila is right in positing Theodora as the author or not, it becomes abundantly clear to anyone undertaking a comparison of the *Corpus Areopagiticum* with Proclus’ *The Theology of Plato* that the former is thoroughly indebted to the latter. The adjective *superessential*

or *supraessential*, for example, the Greek ὑπερούσιος (hyperousios), is, to my knowledge, *never ever* used by St. Augustine of Hippo, for example, who is not very far removed in time from the period being discussed, but it *is* used in “*superabundance*” by Proclus. Hence, as Lankila states, “nobody could seriously nowadays deny in scholarly debate that the Corpus is thoroughly permeated with Neoplatonic [or simply *Platonic*] ideas” (2011, p. 1).

Prof. Algis Uždavinys (1962–2010), in his quite appropriate and much-needed critique of the frequent modern academic distortions of the nature of ancient philosophy, styled *Philosophy as a Rite of Rebirth*, sums up the real achievements of “Pseudo-Dionysius” in the following pointed fashion:

“Therefore Dionysius the Areopagite was forced to perform a magnificent trick by using clever deception in order to integrate the Procline [or “Proclean”] metaphysics and theurgy into Christian theology and then to create the Neoplatonic sacramental mysticism within Christian civilization.” (Uždavinys, 2008, pp. 25–26)

There seems to be a possibility, however, that the Platonic Trojan Horse project, if that be a fair term for it, goes beyond the creation of the Corpus itself, and might encompass the commentaries (scholia) customarily attached to it, and perhaps even the tacit approval of the Eastern Roman Emperor. It is somewhat curious, to say the least, that John of Scythopolis, the first known defender of the first century A.D. origin of the Corpus, appears not to be acquainted with the style so peculiar to Proclus, even though the former is writing in or near the year 540, and it is also interesting that he seems not to realize the possible connection between, *on the one hand*, the outlawing of “pagans” as teachers, the forced closure of the Academy in Athens in 529 A.D., and the exodus of philosophers to Syria, and, *on the other hand*, the sudden appearance of the Corpus in precisely *Syria* at around that time.

As Tuomo Lakila comments:

“In this scholion [the commentary by John of Scythopolis] the real chain of influences and events [having to do with the historical relationship between Platonism, “Israelism” and Christianity] is reversed. I am unable to state whether or not these remarkable scholia should be read as part of the deception or as some of the earliest pieces of evidence of its efficacy.” (2011, p. 6)

Referring to Carlo Maria Mazzucchi, Lankila also mentions the proposition, which he does call fanciful, that Emperor Justinian would have been aware of the “operation” due to his secret services. (2011, p. 15)

But at this point, we are entering the realm of pure speculation – not in the original, ancient sense of *lofty contemplation*, but in the secular sense of conjecture, or flights of the imagination.

Before we conclude our stay in the enlightening oasis of the “Pseudo-Areopagite”, I would like to emphasize that anyone who still entertains the view that Christianity was “Platonized” by Pseudo-Dionysius, in the 500s, needs to realize how very far that is from the truth. Not only was St. Augustine of Hippo, one of the foremost Christian theologians of all time, and a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church, indebted to Platonism for his conversion away from Materialism and Manichaeism (as the remarkably candid bishop explains in the story of his spiritual journey that is his famous but oft-misrepresented *Confessions*) – his *reliance* on Platonic metaphysics is patently obvious to anyone familiar with Plato’s *Republic/Politeia*.

The very fact that the insertion of “Pseudo-Dionysian” theology into Christianity was at all *possible*, evinces *the great similarity and compatibility* that already existed between the Christian and Platonic theologies. I am inclined to go even further, however, and say that Christianity was Platonic from its very inception, and that Jesus Christ, if we for a moment adopt the viewpoint of disinterested, secular history, is best understood as a “Galilean Socrates”. I am not thereby dismissing His claim to divinity (if He actually did claim to be divine), and to a unique role, I am simply pointing out the truly amazing similarities between the ethics, the theology and the biography of Socrates, as recorded by Plato, and the contents of the Christian Gospels – a topic to which I intend to return in the near future.

John Scotus Eriugena and his super-essential synthesis of St. Augustine of Hippo and Proclus, the Diadochos

Now that we have peered into the conundrum that is “Pseudo-Dionysius”, the “Pseudo-Areopagite” (originally thought to have lived in the first century A.D., but now known to have lived in the sixth – or, at any rate, no earlier than the time of Proclus) and his or her *Corpus Areopagiticum* or *Dionysiacum* – a conundrum which may well have been dispelled by the groundbreaking research carried out by Tuomo Lankila – I will move on to the next historical figure who seems to have a stature in relation to Platonism and the higher human faculties worthy of some consideration, namely John Scotus Eriugena (c. 800–c. 877 A.D.).

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Moran and Guiu, 2021) states that Eriugena “is generally recognized to be both the most outstanding

philosopher (in terms of originality) of the Carolingian era and of the whole period of Latin philosophy stretching from Boethius to Anselm". Hence, this most unusual Irishman (Eriu is the ancient goddess of the land or domain of Ireland), learned in Greek, and employed for a time at the magnificent court of Charles II (Charles the Bald), king of the Western part of the continental European empire built by Charlemagne, his grandfather, is clearly held in high regard by many of the scholars of the twenty-first century, even though he used to be viewed as a somewhat controversial figure, since he was never sainted by, and eventually even rejected by, the very church he seems to have labored so hard to inform and benefit.

Having read his most important large work, the *Periphyseon*, and being intimately familiar with the thought of both Plato and Proclus and St. Augustine, my assessment of Eriugena's place in the history of philosophy actually runs counter to the one quoted above (even though the authors qualify their statement by limiting the period of which Eriugena is said to be the most outstanding philosopher to one starting in the late 400s and ending in the 1100s A.D.), since that appraisal is that he is not a very innovative or remarkable thinker, nor an exceptional builder of metaphysical systems, but that he is rather an unusually eloquent and insightful interpreter and communicator of *the essence of the Platonic Tradition*, and of the Platonic Christianity of St. Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius and other Fathers of the Church (if Pseudo-Dionysius, who, as we have seen, is likely the late Platonist Theodora, may be styled "a Father of the Church").

That is not to say that he is not worth reading – he certainly is – what it does mean is that he is not a philosopher on a par with Pythagoras or Plato or Proclus, for instance, nor a pioneering mediator between religions (Platonism and Christianity) in the way St. Augustine was, but simply a very erudite and open-minded scholar, distinguished when compared to the Western European academic milieu of his time by the

fact that he was fluent in Greek. (That milieu was rather small, by the way, and had largely been engendered by the Carolingian Renaissance set in motion by Charlemagne, the emperor).

Here we have, by the way, if we consider the Stanford Encyclopedia description of him, yet another instance of a pattern I have been noticing ever since I actually read several of St. Augustine's most highly acclaimed treatises myself, while still having the Platonic dialogues and my analyses of them fresh in my memory, namely that historians often seem to overestimate the originality of the works of prominent Christian theologians, while downplaying or failing to grasp the real originality or explanatory or synthesizing power of various non-Christian thinkers and sages, such as the oft-abhorred and frequently slandered "pagan Neoplatonists" (for a particularly distasteful example of such negative and unjust attitudes, see the horrible foreword written by Prof. E. R. Dodds to the Oxford 1933 edition of Proclus' *Elements of Theology*).

Not that originality or innovation should be a goal in itself – it should certainly not be sought merely for its own sake, and much of modern philosophy, which differs fundamentally from Platonic philosophy (Uždavinys, 2008, pp. vii-viii), seems to be more about the building of new and complex systems, for the sake of the advancement of the worldly ego of the philosopher, or for the sake of some more or less covert political agenda or imagined future utopia, than about the open-minded and honest ascertaining of the Truth, and the refining of venerable traditions – but originality which actually represents an advancement, or an exceptionally acute rendering of previous accomplishments, is clearly deserving of praise, regardless of whether the author is Christian or non-Christian, since the fundamental Truth underlying and giving rise to this visible cosmos of ours must be the same everywhere, and no genuine discovery and no truly profound insight can ever be in or come into conflict with it.

Moreover, it is not hard to see why historians who themselves have a narrowly Christian conviction might be liable to the exaggerating of the merits of Christian treatises, while being equally prone to criticizing treatises perceived as “pagan” – but, as I have already indicated, and as all the momentous archeological discoveries and all the stunning forays of Higher Criticism made over the last two hundred years have amply demonstrated, the Biblical dichotomy of “pagan versus Christian”, or of “true believer versus silly idolater”, is largely *untenable and spurious*, and arises out of polemics projected onto the ill-defined concept of “God” for ethnic or political reasons, and not out of actual historical realities, which in fact show us that the origins of Christianity and “Judaism” are just as “pagan”, for lack of a better term, as the other religious traditions of the world, since they are plainly and massively indebted to ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian thought, and since there are also certain striking similarities between the so-called “Abrahamic” religions and the “Eastern” religio-philosophical traditions (such as those based on the Vedas).

Hence, to put it even more bluntly, if we desire to be fair and just, we have to abandon this ingrained way of thinking, and confess that our ancestors – intellectual as well as biological – allowed themselves to be deceived into adopting it, when they naïvely took alleged “Holy Scriptures” at face value, more or less at once, instead of placing them into their actual context, and instead of considering the possible undisclosed intents and purposes underlying and motivating the creation of their visible words and letters.

But to return to our dear Johannes the Irishman, born of Eriu:

It is possible to identify a number of most interesting facets of thought in his *Periphyseon*, which is divided into five books, and particularly in Book III and IV. Going through all of them would require many pages, and since this is only supposed to be a relatively brief survey, I will only treat

of some of the most outstanding ones.

I. Creation as an Ongoing Emanation from the “No-Thing” that is the One

In the first place, I was exceedingly surprised to find buried in Book III the exact same thought which I have myself been entertaining for some time, since the completion of my thesis or thereabouts, namely that **the concept of Creation out of Nothing, which is attributed to the Book of Genesis, and which (unfortunately) became such a prominent feature of orthodox Christian theology, could actually be viewed as signifying that the First Principle, “the Goodness beyond being” (619c), or “the Superessential Good” (628b, 903b, 903d), as Eriugena, drawing on Pseudo-Dionysius, also chooses to call it - is creating the world *out of itself*** (since that which is superessential is “no thing” at all, and therefore, in a sense, “nothing”), by way of a process of “going-forth” or emanation from itself; an “overflowing” and a “flow”, as Eriugena chooses to style it.

Phrased differently, this interpretation of the famous concept of “Ex Nihilo” would mean that “God”, i.e. the Supreme Deity, does not make “something” out of “nothing”, in the ordinary sense of the latter word – a notion which is philosophically absurd, since it involves the First, Eternal and Unchanging, Perfect and Time-Transcending Divine Principle in worldly acts of creation in time – but actually fashions the world in an *indirect* manner, out of its Unknowable, “Super-Essential” Essence, by way of stages of emanations, in a manner similar to how a wonderful, deep well with a completely unknown source gives rise to a great lake or river – emanations which are initially beyond all time, and therefore have no beginning and no end, but are perpetually active, in an ever-present, unfathomable “Now”, as it were.

There can be no doubt that this – Creation as a process arising out of the seeming “Nothingness” that is the Unknowable Nature of the First Cause

- is what Eriugena is referring to when he says that

“For it is agreed and incontrovertibly established that all things that are and that are not flow together from the one Principle of all things, whether in the Primordial Causes which were eternally made once and for all in the only begotten Word of God; or in the unformed matter from which the primordial causes of the visible creation received the occasions for their appearance through generation (...)” (638b)

Of this “Principle of all things”, he further states, quoting a beautiful passage in Pseudo-Dionysius, the following:

“Again, it is called perfect both because it is incapable of being increased and is ever perfect, and because it is incapable of being diminished as transcending and overflowing all things in a single and incessant generosity that is through itself overfull and undiminished.” (643a)

Here it should be observed that this idea of an “overflowing” as the beginning of Creation – a Creation which encompasses both the first or purely spiritual Creation and the one we refer to as the world – is also found in Plato (508b) and St. Augustine (Schilvold, 2020, pp. 86–87). It is superior both conceptually and logically to the crude and self-contradictory notion that one god, the only God, embarked on the fashioning of the world out of a void, while at the same time retaining his status as a supreme deity.

Firstly, the same entity cannot both be *in* Time and *acting in* Time and *completely beyond* Time, and, secondly, the entity responsible for the initial creation of something *cannot*, obviously, *itself be part of* that which is thus created (as Eriugena indeed affirms in 482c). But these and other basic insights were not fully incorporated into that which became

mainstream, institutionalized Christianity, and the consolidated religion was therefore unnecessarily mired in philosophically untenable dogmas which could not, in the long run, be upheld, and which made “God”, i.e. the Supreme and Unknowable Being, responsible for the condition of the World of Matter (and this in spite of the fact that there is no mention of a creation “ex nihilo” in Genesis at all).

This is very, very important to grasp. The alleged “Problem of Evil”, and the insurmountable paradoxes of a god simultaneously surveilling world affairs and residing in Absolute Transcendence, as the First Cause, and of a Father of All who is supposedly good and omniscient, but who is nevertheless prone to fits of anger, and to genocidal rants, simply did not exist in ancient theologies like that of Platonism, since those theologies had come out of centuries or even millennia of observation, contemplation and informed debating, and had been developed to a level capable of accommodating all such issues, as well as many, many more.

Some have even surmised that all the ancient and remarkably profound theologies originally came out of a hypothesized pre-historical, ancient high civilization of global reach often styled “Atlantis”, and not without reason – they are all remarkably similar in certain ways.

He further explains how the First Principle is not “first” in a chronological sense, as most people uneducated in theology and philosophy tend to think when confronted with the idea of a Supreme Deity, beyond it all, but first in rank – first in the sense that it occupies the highest and very first position in the great hierarchy of Being, or the Celestial Hierarchy, as Pseudo-Dionysius chooses to style it. From this First Cause do all creatures proceed and tend – and that is one sense in which the epithet “the Beginning and the End” may be taken. This is how Eriugena makes the interlocutor “Alumnus” respond:

“(...) that this (process) [of Creation] was not distributed over periods of time is shown by the Holy Father Augustine in his *Hexaemeron*. For **it is not in time that formlessness precedes form but in the natural order in which the cause comes before the effect.**” (647b, emphasis added)

On the topic of the First Cause itself, the dialogue has the following to say:

“(...) it became necessary and inevitable in the course of discussing the principles of things, that is, the primordial causes, to introduce what it came into our mind (to say) about the one principle of all things also, that is, about God, Who only is the one and first Cause of all causes and the Cause beyond causality and the Goodness beyond being, by participation in Whom all principles and all causes of all things subsist, while He Himself participates in none because He has no principle at all whether superior to Him or co-existent with Him that it not coessential with Him (...).” (619c)

This highly advanced manner of conceiving of the Supreme God of All clearly has a great deal in common with the “Father” in Plato's *Politeia*, of whom Socrates refuses to speak (506d–507a), the Good beyond Being of Iamblichus (*On the Egyptian Mysteries*, Ch. 1, Section V), the Superessential God of Proclus (*On the Theology of Plato*) and the Ein Sof of Esoteric Judaism (c.f. the *Zohar*) – and this becomes amazingly obvious when “Alumnus” begs his Master to “explain what Holy Theology means by **that name of 'Nothing'**”. (680c, emphasis added). The response given is as follows:

“I should believe that by that name [of 'Nothing'] is signified the ineffable and incomprehensible and inaccessible brilliance of the Divine Goodness which is unknown to all intellects whether human or angelic — for it is superessential and supernatural –, which while it is contemplated in itself neither is nor was nor shall be, for

it is understood to be in none of the things that exist because it surpasses all things, but when, by a certain ineffable descent into the things that are [an eminently Platonic expression], it is beheld by the mind's eye [c.f. Plato's Eye of the Soul, in the *Politeia*], it alone is found to be in all things, and it is and was and shall be. Therefore so long as it is understood to be incomprehensible by reason of its transcendence it is not unreasonably called "Nothing", but when it begins to appear in its theophanies [or divine manifestations] it is said to proceed, as it were, out of nothing into something (...)." (680d-681a)

The Supreme Deity referred to as "Nothing" is, in other words, said by Eriugena to be inaccessible and unknowable even to the angels - a category which does not, obviously, encompass the Wisdom of God, the Only Begotten Son, who could perhaps be styled the foremost Angel or Messenger of the Lord, since Eriugena elsewhere states that nothing at all is hidden to that Wisdom (777b-777c) - and these angels are, I surmise, more or less identical to the Beings mentioned by Plato in dialogues like the *Politeia*, the undoubtedly Divine Beings of the Realm of Higher Being, or the Upper Section of the Realm of the Noetic, who are also, one may infer, unable to obtain Knowledge of the Good "as it is in itself", since that Good is beyond Essence or Being, and first manifested by "the Only Begotten" Idea of the Good.

Whether this entity may be contemplated or not, depends on one's definition of Contemplation. If it is used in the sense of Plato's Greek Noesis, which is a Seeing carried out by the Eye of the Soul, or in the sense of St. Augustine's Latin Contemplatio, which is also such a Seeing, then one would probably have to say that the "Nothing" or Ein Sof cannot possibly be contemplated, since it cannot possibly be beheld by any Third Eye or "Intellect".

However, since Eriugena clearly, as the *Periphyseon* evinces, grasps the

concept of Spiritual Seeing, and the Platonic distinction between such Seeing and Discursive Reason, this particular instance of his use of the term contemplation must be taken to mean that the Divine Nothing or Ein Sof (a “Hebrew” term) may be arrived at and dwelled on by Reason, and in that sense “seen”, and not in the sense of the Actual, Divine Seeing of the Amazingly Beautiful Divine Light attributed to the Eye of the Soul – and this does indeed appear to be what Eriugena himself affirms to be his meaning in the sentence mentioning understanding of the incomprehensible (681a).

Hence, the entire above quote on the Name of Nothing is easily reconciled with Platonism, and we need not even speak of the members of that largely artificial construct of “Neo-Platonism”, on which some would claim that Eriugena builds – partly without knowing it – but may safely assume that Plato himself would have been able to endorse all that Eriugena here affirms.

But what would this Nothing resemble, if we could experience it? It is certainly not a vacuum or a void or an abyss, in any of the ordinary senses of those terms, and we should certainly not apply notions such as “darkness” or “blackness” or “obscurity” to it, in the way we might apply those to a night or a chasm or an emptiness, but the Supreme Deity is nevertheless often said to be “dark” or “black” or “incomprehensible”, as it were, since its indescribable Beauty and Goodness and Truth cannot but appear as a sort of overwhelming obscurity to those incapable of fathoming it.

Now, according to the theology we are presently reviewing, only the Son or Wisdom or Image of the Supreme Deity is able to know its source, but even that Eternal Word may appear as a kind of darkness to Spiritual Eyes or Intellects below it, if they have not been purified of the shadows of Becoming, and gradually accustomed to gazing towards the Divine Light of Being.

To use a Platonic metaphor: Just as the physical eye is overwhelmed by a sudden transition from deep night to bright daylight, and has difficulty seeing for a while, so the Eye of the Soul is overcome by too rapid a change from the depths of Becoming to the brilliance of Being. This is what Eriugena has in mind when he states that

“(...) the inaccessible brilliance of the celestial powers is often called by theology darkness. Nor is this surprising when even the most high Wisdom itself, **which is what they** [the theologians engaged in contemplation] **approach** [since no one may approach the unknowable First Principle directly], is very often signified by the word 'Darkness'”. (681b, emphasis added)

II. The Nature of the Life to Come: Not a physical resurrection, but spiritual bliss

Another prominent facet of thought in the Periphyseon is the nature of the Afterlife. This is worth mentioning not because of any originality but because of the admirable clarity with which it is stated, and ought to be of special interest to contemporary Christian readers, as it demonstrates just how astonishingly far in the direction of abject Materialism and worldliness Christianity has fallen since early and high medieval times.

Already in Book I, “Alumnus” is made to make the supposition that “the happiness to come which is promised to the saints” is considered to be “nothing else but the pure and unmediated contemplation of the Divine Essence itself” (447b), and to this “Nutritor” responds that the Afterlife certainly does consist in the contemplation of the Divine, but that it is not the Divine Essence itself that is beheld (as is also pointed out in 681b), but an image of it; a theophany (447c–448c) or apparition. Incidentally, I

brought up the idea of a distinction between the Eternal Word and the image of it in the Soul, which is very similar to the one Eriugena is expressing, in the latter part of my master's thesis (Schilvold, 2020, pp. 84-85). In any case, what is of great interest here is that the conception of the Afterlife as a continual gazing at the Supreme Deity is taken more or less for granted, which is certainly not the case today, even though most ordinary Christians still retain some vague notion of the Next Life as being somehow located in the Kingdom of Heaven – or simply in “Heaven”.

This Life to Come, as Eriugena likes to style it, is also affirmed to be an ecstatic or profoundly blissful experience when “Nutritor” points out that the righteous in this world have a foretaste of this contemplation, which will consist in seeing God in the same manner as the Angels do, “when they [the righteous] experience *ecstasy*” (448b, italics added).

This is then further reinforced when “Alumnus” responds to “Nutritor” by concluding that

“It is certainly as clear as such things are permitted to be to our minds: for, concerning what is ineffable, who in this life can speak with such clarity as to leave nothing more for inquirers to wish for – especially as we are promised no other glory than knowledge by direct experience in the life to come of those things which here (on earth) are believed by faith, and inquired into and, as far as may be, commended by reason?” (451c, c.f. 482c-483a)

Here we have is a statement which strikingly echoes one made by St. Augustine in *De Trinitate*, which is worded as follows:

“We then now put faith in things done in time [the Incarnation etc.] on our account, and by that faith itself we are cleansed; in order that when we have come to sight, as truth follows faith, so eternity

may follow upon mortality.” (D.Tr. IV.18.24)

To my great surprise and relief, the venerable Irish sage even eschews the partly materialist eschatology of ordinary Christianity – which appears to have arisen out of a rather unsuccessful effort to reconcile the worldly notion of collective, earthly “salvation” in Messianic Judaism, likely an amputated derivative of the far more ancient Vedic doctrine of successive ages (yugas) and sets of ages (mahayugas), with the far more spiritual and individually oriented and otherworldly concept of salvation hinted at in the utterances attributed to Christ, and expressly set forth by Socrates in Plato's *Republic*. Do also note the concept of non-locality and non-temporality, which I mentioned in the introduction to my thesis, without having read Eriugena. This is the wonderful passage I have in mind:

“(…) For that which contains is necessarily understood as prior to that which is contained, as the cause precedes the effect, fire the conflagration, voice the word, and so on; and **therefore we hold that no other beatitude is promised to those who are worthy, and [that there will be] no other end of this world, but the ascent beyond places and times of all those who shall receive the glory of theosis, that is, deification. For those who are bound by place and time are finite ; but the eternal beatitude is infinite.** Therefore those who participate in the eternal and infinite beatitude will be encompassed neither by place nor by time. For that which is written concerning Melchisedec alone, that he had no father or mother, nor a beginning of days to his attaining essence through generation, nor end of his time, must, I think, be understood generally of all who shall participate in the beatitude that is to come. For all who shall return into their eternal reasons, which have neither a beginning in time [through generation in place and time] nor an end [through dissolution], and are not defined by any local position, so that only (their eternal reasons),

and nothing else will be in them, will surely lack every local and temporal limit.” (482c-483a, emphasis added)

Further details on Eriugena's views of the Afterlife are found in Book V, where Eriugena articulates the widespread ancient mystical conception of Human Nature before its “Fall” into Matter, namely that Man, or the Human Being, in its original, pristine state, before differentiation, had no specific gender, and was, in a sense, “hermaphrodite”. This claim ought not to be taken to mean that this first Human Being had a biological body with no reproductive organs, or both male and female reproductive organs, as the reader has hopefully already realized, *but as meaning that the Spiritual Human Being was not characterized by one of the two metaphysical properties or tendencies described in myths as “male” and “female”,* and instead transcended or encompassed both of these fundamentally spiritual qualities.

Eriugena puts it in the following way, via “Nutritor”:

“Further discussion of this matter is superfluous, for in the previous books we have repeatedly shown with good reason supported by the opinions of the Blessed Gregory and his commentator Maximus that in the life to come after the resurrection there will be no distinguishing mark of sex whatever in human nature, that is, no distinction of form between male and female; for human nature will have returned into that form which was made in the Image of God. The Image of God is neither male nor female; this division in our nature came about as the result of sin.” (896b)

Here I will allow myself to interject that possible references to this ancient doctrine are actually found in both Plato (Symposium) and in the Book of Genesis. This is what a literal translation of Genesis 5:1-2 might look like:

“This is the book of [the] generations of adam; in the day elohim [plural] shaped adam, as an image of elohim he made him [adam]. Male and female he made them, and proclaimed the name adam, in the day they were made.”

As for Plato, he lets the interlocutor Aristophanes tell the following myth in the dialogue the *Symposium*:

In the first place, let me treat of the nature of man and what has happened to it; for the original (πάλαι) human nature (φύσις) was not like the present, but different. The sexes were not two as they are now, but originally three in number; there was man, woman, and the union of the two, having a name corresponding to this double nature, which had once a real existence, but is now lost, and the word ‘Androgynous’ is only preserved as a term of reproach. (...) Now the sexes were three, and such as I have described them; because the sun, moon, and earth are three; and the man was originally the child of the sun, the woman of the earth, and the man-woman of the moon, which is made up of sun and earth, and they were all round and moved round and round like their parents. Terrible was their might and strength, and the thoughts of their hearts were great, and they made an attack upon the gods; of them is told the tale of Otys and Ephialtes who, as Homer says, dared to scale heaven, and would have laid hands upon the gods. Doubt reigned in the celestial councils. Should they kill them and annihilate the race with thunderbolts, as they had done the giants (γίγαντες), then there would be an end of the sacrifices and worship which men offered to them; but, on the other hand, the gods could not suffer their insolence to be unrestrained. At last, after a good deal of reflection, Zeus discovered a way. He said: ‘Methinks I have a plan which will humble their pride and improve their manners; men (ἄνθρωποι) shall continue to exist, but I will cut them in two and then they will be diminished in strength and increased in numbers

(...). (Symposium 189d-190c)

But to return to Eriugena: In Book V he also affirms what he said on the contemplation of the Divine in Book I:

“(...) in the life to come when they return into their former glory of the Divine Image to which they were created, raised above all things they shall see their God “face to face”, in so far as it is given to the comprehensible and intelligible creature to behold the incomprehensible and unintelligible Cause of the Universe. By “face to face” is meant “in the highest possible theophany,” as the Apostle says: “We now behold as in a mirror darkly but then face to face,” meaning by the word “face” a certain apparition, comprehensible to the human intellect, of the Divine Virtue [or Excellence] which in Itself is perceived by no creature.” (926d)

III. Vestiges in Eriugena of the concepts of Nous and Noesis

With that quote, I choose to close the consideration of the character of the Afterlife, as set forth by Eriugena, and to move on to the third feature of the *Periphyseon* I would say is worthy of attention, namely the traces of the concepts of Nous and Noesis.

These traces consist mainly in certain expressions and sentiments scattered about in the depths of the c. 720 pages making up the modern English edition of this work, and not in a clearly articulated doctrine, but some of them are very telling.

Near the beginning of Book III we find, for example, the following interesting statement, namely that “the Third Book shall consist, under God’s guidance, of whatever the Divine Light shall reveal to our minds concerning the third aspect of universal Nature, that is, concerning that part of creation which is created and does not create.” (619d-620a)

The way this is phrased would seem to indicate a distinction between “God”, the Supreme Deity, and “the Divine Light”, and also to hint at the existence of a mental faculty or power capable of apprehending or being illuminated by that Divine Light. Hence, this paragraph would seem to be compatible with Plato's doctrine of a Divine Idea of the Good, providing light-like Truth and sight-like Nous, and of an Eye of the Soul capable of receiving Truth-mediated impressions, and of achieving “realized Nous”; Noesis or Sight – a doctrine I did my utmost to explain in my master's thesis. But is this actually what Eriugena has in mind? Or are we reading too much into his words? Probably not, for later on, we find him claiming that

“(...) the order of the primordial causes is constituted in the judgment of the mind which contemplates them in so far as knowledge of them is granted to those who discourse on the divine causes. For a devout and pure-minded philosopher may start from any one of them at will and let his mind's eye, which is true reason, [embrace] the others in any order of contemplation, observing all of them that he can, and conclude his contemplation at any one of them whatever (...).” (624c)

Here we find the highly significant term “mind's eye”, which, if we allow “mind” to be interchangeable with “soul”, is also a term found in Plato's *Republic/Politeia* and in St. Augustine's *Confessions* and *De Trinitate* (Schilvold, 2020). Since I do not have access to a copy of the *Periphyseon* in the original Latin, I cannot at present determine what the Latin phrase underlying this English translation by O'Meara is, but it seems likely that the word rendered as “mind” is either “mens” or “anima”. In either case, it would also be permissible, and perhaps more in tune with Eriugena's intention, to translate the Latin as “the eye of his soul”.

But here we are also confronted with another difficulty, which is the

statement that “the eye of his soul” is “true reason”. Why does Eriugena make such a qualification? It can only have one of the two following meanings: (1) That he views the Eye of the Soul or Mind as being identical to the faculty some style Discursive Reasoning or Understanding; the *Dianoia* of Plato, in which case I would contend that he is wrong, or (2) that he believes that “true reason” is identical to the faculty referred to by Plato and St. Augustine as the Eye of the Soul; the “Intellect” (Latin: “*intellectus*”), as it is sometimes called.

However, without knowing whether the Latin word here translated as “reason” is *intellectus* or *ratio*, or something else, it is hard to determine with certainty precisely what Eriugena is desirous of expressing. If the word is *ratio*, then the former interpretation would perhaps be the most reasonable (no pun intended), since *ratio* usually means reason or *dianoia* when mental faculties are being discussed, but if it is *intellectus*, then the latter would probably be preferable. However, in either case, one could also argue that the use of the adjective “true” would seem to necessitate an interpretation of “*ratio*” or “*intellectus*” as referring to a faculty above or beyond ordinary reason – which is exactly what the Eye of the Soul is. In Plato, it is the fifth of the faculties or powers, if they are counted from below, and the first, if counted from above.

What this brief analysis also demonstrates is the ambiguity of several of the English and Latin terms we have just treated of. “Mind” has no very specific, philosophically lucid significance in contemporary English, and “Intellect” is most often used as synonymous with Reason or Ratio, even though a few “intellectuals” (who are usually reason-centered “rationalists”, or rather “fact”-oriented “empiricists”) apparently use it to signify Plato's fifth or highest mental faculty, the Third Eye, which is comparable to the Ajna Chakra of the Vedic or Indian tradition. As for the Latin terms *anima* and *animus*, they are equally lacking in specificity, and have a more or less equally wide spectrum of meaning.

This pervasive linguistic ambiguity is a huge contemporary obstacle to studying the faculties or powers of the human psyche, and can only be overcome by establishing precise definitions of all essential terms at the outset, and asking the reader to constantly keep those definitions in mind.

There are a number of other instances of the use of such “inner eye” or “third eye” language in Eriugena's great work. He says, for example, that the category of the invisible is “contemplated (...) by the eye of the intelligence” (484a), that we contemplate geometrical bodies “only by the mind’s eye”, and “with the mind alone” (493d), that “quantities and qualities (...) are beheld by the eye of the mind alone” (499a), that “formless matter is beheld only by the eye of the mind, I mean by the reason (500c), that the spiritual and the invisible and other such categories are “considered and perceived by the intellect alone” (633a), and that the objects of “these very subtle inquiries” “would not easily so appear to the inward eyes of even better men than me that they would be able to attach themselves to a firm conviction at once (...)” (635b). In addition to all these, we also have the following statement on the reason for the Incarnation of the Word:

“For in God and in the primordial causes they behold all things beyond every sense and intellect, since they do not require all the works of nature in order to see the truth, but use only the ineffable grace of the eternal light, and **it was to bring human nature back to this vision that the Incarnate Word of God descended, taking it upon Himself after it had fallen in order that He might recall it to its former state, healing the wounds of transgressions, sweeping away the shadows of false fantasies, opening the eyes of the mind,** showing Himself

in all things to those who are worthy of such a vision.” (683d- 684a, emphasis added)

Hence, what we find is that the organ or sense (or chakra) of inner sight is sometimes attributed to “reason”, sometimes to “intelligence” and sometimes to the even less specific term “mind”. In contrast, Plato always conceives of the inner eye (*Politeia* 533c, 540a) or “organ” (*Politeia* 518c, 527d-527e) as belonging to the soul, the psyche, and as being the highest and the “royal” (*Politeia* 560b, 580b, 586e-588a) human faculty or power, and never confuses it with “intellect” (or nous, which is said to be sight-like (*Politeia* 507c-509a, 517b-517c)) or understanding (dianoia).

Eriugena's use of this terminology seems, in other words, a little confused, which raises the question: Are these expressions intended by him to be taken as metaphors only; as figures of language not meant to signify what they appear to be signifying? Or is he actually of the conviction that there is a suprarational faculty or power, a sort of higher reason, capable of a higher kind of seeing, a seeing far surpassing even that carried out by our marvelous physical eyes in terms of both lucidity, range of vision and objects seen?

One of his descriptions of the capacities of the inner power of vision is of a nature that does allow us to surmise that he in fact subscribes to a concept similar or identical to Plato's Eye of the Soul, even though he either does not have a perfectly clear picture of the nature of that power in his mind, or believes that it is best described as the higher or more otherworldly part of a faculty of Reason consisting of two distinct parts. If the latter should be the case, it would mean that he thinks of Reason as consisting of both the inner power of seeing and the discursive or analytical faculty – a view which is also discernable in various other medieval compositions. This is the passage in question:

“‘Act’ is the motion of the mind in contemplating in itself and in them the multiplication of the numbers as they proceed from the Monad into the diverse genera and different species before they reach the fantasies of cogitation, that is, **in considering with the eye of the intellect beyond all quantity and quality and places and times the numbers themselves** < in > the simplicity of their incorporeal nature which lacks all imagery; and, to give a brief definition: Act is the motion of the mind in regarding without any imagery the numbers under the most pure aspect of their nature.”
(657c-657d)

The reason why I say this characterization of “the eye of the intellect” reminds me of Plato’s “organ” is that “arts” involving numbers are said in Plato’s *Politeia* to play an absolutely crucial role in the turning around or conversion of the Eye of the Soul (*Politeia* 518d, 525a, 526d-527c) from the comparatively gloomy realm of Becoming, which is a realm of phantasms, and of mere opinion or belief, to the glorious, luminous plane of Higher Being, which is a realm of marble-like Divine Light, allowing for the acquisition of Objective Knowledge – and I also say so, moreover, because of the kinship between the Platonic and Pythagorean philosophies or roads to God, a kinship which is not only readily apparent to anyone well-versed in classical literature, but also confessed by Plato himself, via Socrates (*Politeia* 530d).

There is also another and equally intriguing faculty-related term in the *Periphyseon*. It is only mentioned four times, as in the sentence “For these [the esoteric properties of a circle] and like matters are judged by the sheer sharpness of the mind.” (625b) The reason why this “sheer sharpness of the mind” is immensely interesting is that I am instantly reminded of the “mens acies” of St. Augustine and his “mentor” Cicero (Schilvold, 2020, pp. 72-73), an expression which can also be translated as *the sharp edge* or pupil of the mind, or even as *the determined gaze* or *acute sight* of the mind (Lewis & Short).

However, on the basis of the four instances of this expression in the *Periphyseon*, it is not possible to say whether or not Eriugena actually has the ancient Eye of the Soul, and its “full-blown” Contemplation or Noesis (which is certainly a Power of Sight transcending even the exquisite glory of worldly or sensual sight) in mind, or if he is simply thinking of the more “ordinary” and rather blurry mental seeing we always carry out when solving abstract problems.

Eriugena's cogitation frankly seems, as already mentioned, a little undisciplined or imprecise at times, and this only confirms my theory of a gradual decline of the inner or mental life over the course of the last few millennia (since our descent into the Last Age, the Kali Yuga or Iron Age), and a slow loss of the True Eye of the Soul, and the absorption of the lingering remnants of that organ (as Plato calls it), and of the ancient linguistic references to it, into the developing and changing conception of Reason or Understanding, which is one aspect of a narrowing and increasingly pessimistic view of the capabilities of the Human Mind as a whole.

While we are dealing with the topic of Contemplation, it should be noted that Eriugena actually makes a terminological connection which is very rarely, if ever, made today, when he equates the act of contemplation with the act of theorizing. As we are all aware of, the contemporary meaning of the term theory is almost always that of a rational and well-substantiated proposal, but in Plato's time, it could signify a sacred journey (Nagy, 2013), or a beholding, or a sight. Hence, we see that theory or *theoria* (θεωρία) is another one of those ancient terms that have, over time, been deprived of their spiritual and supernatural connotations, and secularized, and appropriated by that shameless rebel known as Reason. This is where the connection is made:

“But because by some means unknown and supernaturally

discovered they [the primordial causes, 626a-626b] take shape in their theophanies in the minds of those who contemplate them, in them too <they are seen> to be able to be multiplied and divided and numbered, I mean in [the intellects] of those who contemplate them in so far as they are able; and the result of this is that in themselves they, that is, the primordial causes, admit no order [that is known] to any intellect or sense, **while in the mind that theorizes, that is, contemplates them, many different ways of ordering them are, as it were, conceived by the intellect in the reason and born as certain images that resemble them.**" (626d)

If I am grasping Eriugena correctly, and he is indeed suggesting that the apprehension and interpretation of the *order* of the Primordial Causes varies from one contemplating soul to another, then I would have to disagree with him, as I do not think the testimonies of accomplished sages, whether Greek or Indian or Christian, actually indicate that the perception of the hierarchy of causes or gods or angels differs notably from person to person, and I believe Proclus, the author Eriugena never realized he had encountered, would have agreed with me, for in his stunning treatise on the theology he attributes to Plato, he seems to know of no ambiguity to speak of, and to set forth the entire magnificent procession and all of the marvelous successions of the Divine Hierarchy with remarkable clarity and attention to detail, as if he was steadfastly and calmly beholding all of the interconnected emanations from the One with a perfectly attuned Inner Eye, while in the act of composing his verbal description of it.

However that may be, Eriugena does acknowledge that just as a flight of stairs consists of steps, and a ladder of rungs, contemplation is composed of stages, one above another:

“For it often happens that those who begin to enter upon those ascents without the help of a better and purer mind [a guide or guru] either stray and lose their way or, when they can go no higher, fall back to the lower levels or, honouring these ascents in silence, too cautious to suppose it reasonable that they should reach the higher levels, they have remained silent. **For it is for those who are most perfect and who are enlightened by the splendours of the divine radiance, and are thus brought to the most sacred shrines of the celestial mysteries, to scale the highest 'bimata', that is, steps, of divine contemplation and behold without any error the form of truth fully revealed without any cloud obscuring it.**” (627b)

Precisely what these steps consist in is never stated, as far as I can see – perhaps it might be permissible to look to an Indian classic like the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* for hints (the Platonic nature of Eriugena's Christianity, and the surprisingly high degree of kinship between the Platonic and Vedic philosophical traditions, would seem to make that proposition a fairly reasonable one, in spite of its unconventionality) – but the exalted position assigned to Contemplation, a position completely consonant with the great emphasis put on Contemplation by St. Augustine of Hippo, is reaffirmed towards the end of the *Periphyseon*, and so is the presence of gradations:

“O Lord Jesus, I ask of Thee no other reward, no other blessedness, no other joy than this : to understand in all purity and without being led astray by faulty contemplation Thy Words which are inspired by the Holy Spirit. **For this is the crown of my happiness, this the consummation of perfect contemplation : the rational and purified mind shall find nothing beyond this for beyond it there is nothing. For as there is no place in which it is more proper to seek Thee than in Thy words, so is there no place where Thou art more clearly discovered than**

in Thy words. For therein Thou abidest, and thither Thou leadest all who seek and love Thee. Therein Thou preparest for Thine elect the spiritual banquet of true knowledge, and passing you minister to them. And what is the path along which Thou leadest them, O Lord, but an ascent through the innumerable steps of Thy contemplation? And ever dost Thou open that way in the understandings of those who seek and find Thee. Ever art Thou sought by them and ever art Thou found, — and yet ever art Thou not found (...).” (1010b-1010d)

IV. Eriugena's division of Nature or Physis (Πύσις) into Four Novel Categories

The fourth facet of the *Periphyseon* I would like to expound upon is Eriugena's definition of Nature, since the constitution of Nature is, after all, one of the major themes of Eriugena's work, and also one of the most curious, not because he innovates, but because he expresses his schema in such unconventional language. These are his four categories (441a-441b), along with my understanding of them:

1. *That which is not created, and creates.* The super-essential, Supreme Deity. It is not created because there is no Cause whatsoever senior to It in rank, and It creates in an ineffable manner, by way of a ceaseless and mysterious overflowing of or emanation from itself – a primeval act of pure generosity and self-sacrifice and self-limiting – which first generates its Only Begotten Son or Offspring or Sun, and then all the subsequent planes and creatures of Essence or Being and Genesis or Becoming.

2. *That which is created, and creates.* The Primordial Causes, including the Eternal Word, which – in agreement with St. Augustine – is also viewed as the Wisdom of God, the Son of God and the Image of the

Father. This Word is created, not in Time, but in the sense of continually going forth from the Supreme Deity, the metaphorical Father of All, and it, along with the lesser causes or angelic beings or ideas subordinate to it, are forever creating or giving rise to the First Creation, which is not our world, but a “simultaneous whole”, as St. Augustine calls it, existing beyond Time and Place, as an Eternal “Now”, in the Realm of Essence (“Ousia”) or Being (“Awn”), and comprehending, in a potential and paradigmatic and non-localized and non-temporal manner, all objects and all events that arise in Time and Space, in our world, when the First Creation is converted into a Secondary and Lower Creation by an enigmatic, demiurgic translation of the information in the former into the manifestations and the phantasms characterized by the four dimensions of the physical universe – those of the three spatial ones, along with Time.

This second category may perhaps be equated with the Noetic or Intelligible Realm of the Platonic schema.

3. *That which is created, and does not create.* The material world – the world of flux, of Generation (Greek genesis) and Becoming, and, therefore, of Opinion (Greek doxa). The physical universe, in other words. Only this third category is comparable to what we moderns usually mean when we colloquially speak of “nature”. It is created in the sense that it perpetually – but not eternally, since it has a Beginning in Time, as St. Augustine would say – arises out of the First Creation or Simultaneous Intelligible Whole mentioned above, and not directly out of “Nothing” or the Unknowable One, and it is said not to create because none of the creatures of this Secondary Creation are the causes of complete creations or worlds, or of beings on a plane lower than themselves. We incarnated human beings, for example, do carry out semblances of creation when we rearrange matter, and when we reproduce, and I would say we also perform an image of an act of creation when our minds constitute the interpretation of the external world on which we base our

daily lives, but we do not create in the way the gods create – except, perhaps, in those rare instances when we first “intellectualize” or apprehend an idea, and then proceed to fashion a likeness of that idea in matter – which is a mode of creativity very similar to the one engaged in by the demiurgic forces.

4. *That which is not created, and does not create.* The realm of matter itself, i.e. matter not constituted into particular objects. May perhaps be correlated with the Platonic category of Non-Being.

Such, broadly speaking, is Eriugena's cosmology, if that is an acceptable term for a schema encompassing both theogony, theology, cosmology and anthropology. But his definition of Nature is more elaborate than these four categories alone reveal, and later in the *Peripnhyseon*, he makes a most interesting statement, elucidating what he intends to signify by the claim that the class of Nature includes not only that which is created, but also that which creates.

“N. Among the divisions of the created universe I certainly would not place it [the First, Superessential and Unknowable Cause], but for placing it among the divisions of that universe which is comprehended by the term universal Nature I have not one but many reasons.

For by that name, 'Nature', is usually signified not only the created universe but also that which creates it. For the first and greatest division of universal Nature is into that which creates the established universe and that which is created in that established universe.

No wonder, for this division of nature persists uniformly throughout all the universes to infinity. For the first division of the universal Good is into that one and supreme Good (which is) immutable in itself and substantial [and 'creates'], from which every good flows,

and that good which is good by participation in the supreme and immutable Good [and is 'created'].” (621a-621b, emphasis added)

A little further on he articulates more precisely what he means by the term Nature, when he eloquently explains that

“(...) everything that is understood and sensed is nothing else but the apparition of what is not apparent, the manifestation of the hidden, the affirmation of the negated, the comprehension of the incomprehensible, [the utterance of the unutterable, the access to the inaccessible,] the understanding of the unintelligible, the body of the bodiless, the essence of the superessential, the form of the formless, the measure of the measureless, the number of the unnumbered, the weight of the weightless, the materialization of the spiritual, the visibility of the invisible, the place of that which is in no place, the time of the timeless, the definition of the infinite, the circumscription of the uncircumscribed, and the other things which are both considered and perceived by the intellect alone and cannot be retained within the recesses of the memory and which escape the sharpness of the mind.” (633a-633b)

Apart from the clear and unapologetic affirmation of the ancient Mind over Matter worldview, which holds that Consciousness – for lack of a better English term – is prior to and superior to the Material World in terms of dignity and rank, this passage reveals to us that Eriugena views the Intellect as a faculty or power different from that of “the sharpness of mind”, and also that he believes the proper fields of inquiry for that Intellect to be the hidden, the incomprehensible, the unintelligible, the superessential, the formless, the measureless, the spiritual, the invisible, the non-local, the timeless, and so on.

The latter assertion is a curious one, unless there is an error in the

English translation, since there is a commingling of terms here which both Plato and St. Augustine would find objectionable.

We have to assume that Eriugena thinks of all those terms as referring to the same Realm, or the same set of Realms, but if that is the case, the use of terms like “unintelligible” and “incomprehensible” together with “invisible” and “spiritual” is highly problematic, since the Platonic and “Augustinian” metaphysical schemas – which Eriugena is, by his own admission, attempting to build on – make the spiritual and invisible not only intelligible (noetic), but eminently comprehensible, since this class is not only the source of Knowledge (Episteme), but also apprehensible or viewable or knowable by the Eye of the Soul.

One of the terms is particularly baffling, given the context, namely “unintelligible”, an adjective which simply does not occur in St. Augustine, and which has no equivalent in Plato's Greek – at least not in passages dealing with metaphysics. The antonym of the visible and sensible and embodied is the *intelligible*, not the “unintelligible”.

The terminological confusion does not end there, though. The superessential is hardly a proper object of the Intellect, as conceived of by the ancient Platonists and the Platonic Christians, since the superessential is, by definition, beyond Being and unknowable, while the Intellect or the Eye of the Soul deals with that which is “essential” (part of ousia) and knowable.

Eriugena's application of the term “measureless” to the plane or planes of the immaterial and non-temporal, without qualification, should also raise the eyebrows of those on the Path of True Philosophy, as Plato calls his road to bliss and wholeness, for what Plato actually says in his extended metaphor of a dialogue, the woefully misnamed *Republic*, is that nothing imperfect, i.e. nothing in this World of Flux, is or may be taken as a Measure of anything, and that the only True Measure is found

in the Realm of Higher Being, i.e. in the Realm of the Intelligible or Noetic (*Politeia* 486d, 504c, 507e–508a).

We do of course see what Eriugena is attempting to express, but since these matters are already rather abstruse to those unaccustomed to contemplating them, and clarity of language is exceedingly important if the young truth-seekers out there are to be able to break through the clouds of confusion, this juxtaposition of terms which both Plato and St. Augustine and other ancient sages use in a highly disciplined manner, and which in their works do not all refer to that which Eriugena appears to view them as referring to, is rather unfortunate. Hence, even this rhetorically appealing passage raises as many questions as it answers.

But how are these levels of Nature connected? Is this a variant of the “Dualism” - usually a reference to so-called substance dualism - so abhorred by some modern scholars, who quietly subscribe to a contrary doctrine, namely a particular kind of substance monism, best known as materialism?

Most certainly not, for in the following passage, which surely constitutes one of the greatest descriptions of the mysterious process of continual “Creation” by way of an ongoing process of Emanation ever composed by a Christian, Eriugena amply demonstrates that he actually views Nature – i.e. all that is inferior to the First Cause in terms of dignity and rank – as consisting of a series of interconnected phases, one more tangible than the previous one.

This never-ending process of a “Going Forth” from an everlasting center and towards the extremes, or towards a “final frontier”, so to speak, a frontier where the sublime irradiation from the center that is the wave of Emanation from the One at last looses its “impetus” (having traveled a great “distance” – in terms of differentiation, not in terms of time and space – from its origin) and reaches its maximum density and the

greatest difference from its beginning, has oftentimes been visualized and depicted as a so-called Mandala, or a circular or rectangular or flower-like or lotus-like shape characterized by the presence of a single, prominent center, surrounded by various outer layers – a shape which at once represents *both* a two-dimensional cross-section (so to speak) of the actual, multidimensional universe, when viewed as a single whole, consisting in emanations from the First Cause, as well as in that First Cause itself, and a similar two-dimensional cross-section of the equally multidimensional Human Psyche, which also has a “center”, which is unknowable, and a first irradiation from it, which might be styled “the Observer”, perhaps, as well as parts which, at least in some sense, are perpetually proceeding from that center.

The complex patterns characteristic of so-called Persian or Iranian Carpets would appear to have their ancient origin in the symbol that is the Mandala – which is not a mere lifeless representation of unspeakable realities, but a potent and efficacious visual aid to the mental action that is Contemplation – and mandala-like patterns were not always almost exclusively associated with the East, but were once a fairly common feature of the artistic traditions of Europe, as the wonderful mandala-like mosaics found during excavations of Roman villas like the one at Woodchester in England (Lysons and Kalthoeber, 1797) make clear.

But we digress once more. This is the admirably executed summary of the process of Emanation we were speaking of:

Therefore, descending first from the superessentiality of His Nature, in which He is said not to be, He is created by Himself in the primordial causes and becomes the beginning of all essence, of all life, of all intelligence, and of all things which the gnostic contemplation considers in the primordial causes ; then, descending from the primordial causes which occupy a kind of intermediate position between God and the

creature, that is, between that ineffable superessentiality which surpasses all understanding and the substantially manifest nature which is visible to pure minds, He is made in their effects and is openly revealed in His theophanies ; then He proceeds through the manifold forms of the effects to the lowest order of the whole of nature, in which bodies are contained ; and thus going forth into all things in order He makes all things and is made all in all things, and returns into Himself, calling all things back into Himself, and while He is made in all things. He does not cease to be above all things and thus makes all things from nothing, that is, He produces from His Superessentiality essences, from His Supervitality lives, from His Superintellectuality intellects (...). (683a-683b)

Hence, we may conclude that although Eriugena does his utmost to construct a schema or model of the Universe congruent with its actual physical and spiritual structure, he is nevertheless fully aware of the fact that his four-fold division is ultimately inadequate, and constitutes little more than a human imposition of a human description onto a Grand Reality, a Grand, Ongoing Miracle, which can never be adequately described, but only individually glimpsed and intuited, and, as far as the external world is concerned, faintly and feebly hinted at.

That the Universe according to Eriugena may, in a sense, be said to have a four-fold structure, or four major planes or levels, does not at all mean that it cannot also, when viewed in a different way, have a perfectly continuous structure, in which all the planes are interrelated, and in which boundaries and barriers do not really exist.

Plato also espouses a four-fold schema, it should be remembered (Higher and Lower Being and Higher and Lower Becoming; c.f. Schilvold, 2020), and although it differs from that of Eriugena's, the two are similar in that a close reading of Plato's works reveal that the various rungs on Plato's

Heavenly Ladder are no more separate from one another, and no more in accord with the phases of the indescribable Grand Reality of which they are images, than Eriugena's Divisions of Nature, and Plato and Eriugena would have had a great dialogue with one another, had they ever been able to meet, as all genuine Mystics ought to be able to have, for there cannot be many First Causes, but only One, and there are not numerous Ultimate Truths, but only one Luminous Revelation to All, but just as the starry sky may appear in different ways from different points of view, and under various conditions, so the Grand Miracle is apprehended and represented in somewhat different ways by people of different times and places, conditionings and inclinations.

I will let Eriugena have the final word in this overview, by quoting his own following summary of his doctrine:

A gift of the Divine Goodness is that which is supplied to all nature, distributed among the genera and species of all creatures, and which the Superessential Goodness Who is God universally bestows upon all from the highest to the lowest, that is, from the intelligible nature, which is the highest of all creatures, to the corporeal nature, which occupies the last and lowest place in the Universe. (903a-903b, emphasis added)

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